

Managing Agile Troublemakers

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Ideally, all your Agile team members agree with *The Agile Manifesto*, complete their tasks on time, raise concerns immediately, and are fully committed to the success of your organization and its customers. In the real world, of course, this is rarely the case. Most likely, your team will include people with varying levels of commitment and comfort with the Agile framework. Occasionally, your team may also include a “troublemaker,” someone whose behaviors drag the team down and significantly increase the risk of failure. Here’s how to deal with common troublemakers:

- **Agile Hater.** Agile Haters are uncooperative, openly or secretly dislike Agile, and hope it will go away. Agile Haters feel threatened by Agile and prefer to work differently because they may have had success without Agile and/or a bad Agile experience. Or maybe they haven’t seen or agree with the benefits of Agile. Agile does not solve every problem, but if the organization believes it is appropriate for your project, explain to Agile Haters how important they are to the team and ask them to give it a try for a few months. If this does not work, you may have to ask them to find a project more suited to their values and beliefs.
- **Lone Ranger.** Lone Rangers prefer to work alone because they want to control their own destiny or don’t see the benefit of interacting with others. They may prefer messaging to face-to-face communication. After confirming that the team’s meetings and other activities are not too demanding (e.g., balanced with time for individual work), try to get Lone Rangers to understand the benefit of “individuals and interactions,” a foundational Agile principle.
- **Eternal Optimist.** Eternal Optimists give unrealistic estimates, overcommit (possibly because they overestimate their skills, want more control, or like being the hero), and do not ask questions about their assignments or for help until late in the iteration. Meet with Eternal Optimists to explain that accurate estimates are essential to the team’s ability to set realistic expectations of what it can deliver. Mention that teams setting realistic expectations and then delivering on them build trust with stakeholders. When meeting with Eternal Optimists, cite specific examples of their over-optimism and discuss strategies for improving future estimates.
- **Thin-Skinned Contributor.** Thin-Skinned Contributors do not embrace transparency or welcome constructive criticism because of cultural backgrounds, past bad experiences, or lack of confidence. They may also never identify improvements, admit issues, or make suggestions at retrospectives. To help Thin-Skinned Contributors, ensure that criticism from team members is as positive and balanced as possible for everyone, promote a supportive team environment, and resolve conflicts quickly and fairly. Explain the importance of honesty and transparency to Thin-Skinned Contributors and coach them privately on how to give and receive good feedback.
- **Project Dictator.** Project Dictators are the opposite of servant-leaders. They micromanage the team and may publicly criticize team members. You find them serving as Scrum Masters, Agile Coaches, Product Owners/Managers, technical leads, project managers, functional managers, and other stakeholders. Because they typically have positions of power in the organization and over the team, dealing with Project Dictators is complicated, especially if the Project Dictator is your boss! Getting the Project Dictator to change or leave may require dropping subtle hints to them, sending them links to resources about servant leadership, one-on-one conversations to discuss the impact their behavior is having on the team, or raising the issue with their supervisor.
- **Meeting Dominator.** Meeting Dominators enjoy sharing their thoughts and getting their issues resolved but don’t leave enough time for other participants. They might also not actively listen to other conversations, instead preferring to plan their next contributions while others are talking. To

deal with Meeting Dominators, explain the importance of “team” and open communication, and actively police meetings to ensure that all participants have equal time to contribute, raise issues, and get help.

- **Erratic Performer.** Erratic Performers are unreliable because of personal issues, lack of skills and training, or the bad behavior of other team members. They might also be relying too much on others for help. As with any employee performance issue, it’s important to discover the reason for erratic behavior, see if you can address the cause (though some personal issues are off limits), and get them to be accountable to the team.
- **Rigid Resistor.** Rigid Resistors are not flexible or open to changing priorities and assignments, which presents a problem in Agile environments. To deal with them, explain that Agile welcomes changing requirements, even late in the development cycle, and that flexibility gives your customers a competitive advantage, which keeps the team employed. Also explain reasons for specific change requests to help them understand they are not arbitrary.

Don’t forget that most troublemakers just need to be heard and counseled. They might also have valid concerns, so use their feedback as a reason to review your project practices. In general, present your expectations or team performance standards, explain gaps in their performance and the negative impact it has, identify improvements needed, set realistic timeframes for correcting them, and monitor. Be prepared to work with upper management and the People Department (aka Human Resources) to remove them if they don’t improve.

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